



International Boundary Study

No. 35 (*Revised*) – June 3, 1966

Laos – Vietnam Boundary

(Country Codes: LA-VN)

**The Geographer
Office of the Geographer
Bureau of Intelligence and Research**

INTERNATIONAL BOUNDARY STUDY

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THE LAOS–VIETNAM BOUNDARY

I. BOUNDARY BRIEF

The boundary between Laos and Viet-Nam results from administrative actions taken prior to the dissolution of French Indo-China in the late 1940s. The 1,324 mile-long boundary may be considered to be delimited and international¹, although the standard disclaimer should be utilized. For almost 1,150 miles, the boundary coincides with the primary water divide of the Northern Indochinese Highlands and the Chaîne Annamitique or with minor divides within the chain. Rivers and streams form the line for another 148 miles while two straight-line segments, totaling 38 miles, complete the boundary. However, several major and minor streams do cross the frontier.

For the most part, the frontier region is only lightly settled, primarily by minority peoples.

II. BACKGROUND

A. Geographical

The Laos–Viet-Nam frontier region is entirely mountainous. In the north, the uplands are formed by folded ridges aligned, for the most part, northwest to southeast. The average elevation varies from 1,500 meters (5,000 feet) to 1,800 meters (6,000 feet). The many rivers and streams flow through relatively steep valleys cut in the crystalline, limestone, and sandstone rocks producing a dissected and relatively forbidding landscape. As a consequence, the entire region is only sparsely inhabited, for the most part by hardy minority peoples. With intervening plateaus, the mountainous landscape extends westward over much of northern Laos. In northern Viet-Nam, however, it is terminated abruptly by the lowland valley of the Red River delta of Tonkin.

The southern half of the boundary follows the main drainage divide of the Chaîne Annamitique. This Chain extends from northwest to southeast parallel to the course of the Mekong. Strictly speaking the region is not composed of mountains but rather a collection of deeply eroded plateaus dominated by isolated peaks. The steeper slope of the Chain faces toward Viet-Nam with the gentler slopes extending deeply in Laos. In the north, the general pattern of the relief is similar to the Northern Highlands in that ridges and valleys predominate. The sector parallel to and south of the Song Ca is narrow and elevations are somewhat lower than the average for the Chaîne. As a consequence of the low passes, transmontane travel is relatively easy. Southward, approximately at the latitude of Thakhet, the boundary enters a limestone region and the valleys become more entrenched and gorge-like while the peaks become crag-like. Due to the sterility of the soil, settlement is sparse. The limestone sector terminates approximately at the southern limit of the demilitarized zone.

¹ International, as used on small-scale official maps of the U.S. Government, denotes a boundary which is established by treaty or tradition.

For nearly 20 miles southward, the boundary crosses a level area of granite and basalt. Travel is relatively easy and the important National Route No. 9 utilizes the terrain to connect Quang Tri in Viet-Nam and Savannakhet in Laos. The next physiographic region to the south forms the most inaccessible sector of the Chaîne Annamitique. Elevations rise up to 2,000 meters (6,500 feet) in rugged crystalline topography. As a consequence, it is one of the least-known areas of the Indochinese peninsula. In Laos, however, the Chaîne is paralleled by three discontinuous, but broad, sandstone plateaus. From north to south are the plateaus of Cammon (northeast of Thakhek), Kha Leung (southeast of Thakhet), and Ta Hoi (northeast of Saravane). In contrast to the forested boundary region, the plateaus are grass-covered and relatively level and have assumed considerable strategic significance in Pathet Lao operations.

The final sector of the Laos–Viet-Nam boundary comprises a region of crystalline rocks with rounded hills and isolated sharp peaks. Flatish lava flows are interspersed throughout the gently folded plateau. The physical province continues southward from 16° North latitude to the Darlac plateau on the Cambodia–Viet-Nam frontier.

Climatically, the entire frontier region is dominated by the seasonal monsoons so typical of southeast Asia. Secondary influences are felt as a result of elevation and exposure. However, in general, the temperature regime is essentially tropical with the hottest month (85° F.) occurring in April and the coolest (79° F.) in December. A second maximum (82° F.) and minimum (80° F.) develop in the south in August and July, respectively, as a result of the passage of the monsoon. These secondary maxima and minima are lacking in the north. Average daily ranges in temperature normally exceed average annual ranges except in the higher areas.

The rainy season commences in April and continues through November. The remainder, late November through March, constitutes the dry monsoonal period. Within the rainy season, maxima of precipitation normally occur in July and August with over 20 inches of rainfall in each month. However, even in the dry season, no month is completely without precipitation as winter rainfall is induced by typhoon activity. The average annual rainfall for the frontier region is between 80 and 120 inches.

With few exceptions, such as in river valleys, the entire frontier bears a dense forest cover. In the wetter regions with heavy soils, a true tropical rain forest dominates while a more open monsoon forest grows in areas of porous soils and/or seasonal drought.

The tropical rain forest seldom has areas of pure stands; rather multiple species abound. Consequently, commercial utilization of the forest suffers. The typical rain forest is evergreen, multilayered, comprising many species, and is easily penetrated. As a result of widespread practice of "slash and burn" cultivation, over a long period of years, primary or true rain forest is restricted to remote areas. A secondary, or modified, rain forest, which resembles the true rain forest but lacks the valuable hardwoods, now dominates much of the area. The monsoon forest, due to the seasonal drought, is deciduous and generally possesses less dense stands of trees. Undergrowth is rare, although tough and coarse grasses are common in the more open areas.

B. Ethnographical

The Laos–Viet-Nam frontier is, with one exception, inhabited entirely by ethnic minorities. In the south, near the Viet-Nam demilitarized zone, Vietnamese peoples have spread up to and beyond the frontier into Laos. This occupation played an important role in the establishment of the boundary and the placement of a short-lived claim on Laotian territory in the early period of independence.

In the northern highland, from the China border to the valley of the Song Ca, the major groups are extremely varied and intermixed. The Tibeto–Burman Akha occupy the northern tracts before being replaced by ethnic Tai (Lu, Phoutai, Tai Neua, and Tai Phong). Further south the Meo (Miao-Yao) and Kha (Mon-Khmer) predominate as far south as Dien Bien Phu. The remainder of the Highlands to the Song Ca are settled primarily by ethnic Tai (Red, Black, White, Lu, Phoutai, Tai Neua, and Tai Phong) and Meo. The latter occur as isolated islands in the larger sea of Tai.

The northern Chaîne Annamitique, i.e., the narrow ridge area north of the limestone sector, continues to be lightly occupied by ethnic Tai and Meo peoples in the same general pattern as the Northern Highlands. Beginning with the limestone plateaus, however, the Sui, Sedang, and Brao (all Mon-Khmer) dominate the settlement with a few injections of Tai and Vietnamese, the latter in the demilitarized zone sector. Sedang and Brao peoples continue to the Cambodian tripoint.

Population densities in the frontier are generally very low. For the most part, the average density is normally less than 1 person per square kilometer but is always less than 10 per square kilometer. Certain areas close to the border, e.g., the Song Ca valley, have densities locally as high as 50 per square kilometer. However, even these are low by southeast Asian standards.

The minority peoples follow, for the most part, the classical patterns of "slash and burn" agriculture, moving their villages and fields as the natural fertility of the fields declines. The village remains the center of life and is a self-sufficient economic entity. Dry rice is planted in fields which have been cleared by slashing, burning, and/or girdling. The residue from the burned or rotting trees is utilized as the sole fertilizer. Supplementary garden crops, a few domesticated animals, and the products of hunting and fishing supplement the villagers' diet. After several plantings and with the decline in fertility, the fields are abandoned and soon revert to forest. When all usable lands in the neighborhood have been depleted, the village site is abandoned and a new site is selected. Here the age-old process recommences.

C. Historical

Historically, civilization in southeast Asia developed and flourished in the great river basins. The highlands remained as traditional buffer zones between the expanding and contracting riverine empires. As a consequence, continual contact with stable

civilizations has been limited. The Chaîne Annamitique has served for centuries as the boundary zone between the Khmer empire to the west and the Annamese and Champa kingdoms to the east. With the decline of the Khmer state in the 13th century, as a result of pressures from the Thai kingdom to the west, a Laotian state evolved based upon the middle Mekong. During the same period the Annamese southward expansion compressed the Champas into an ever-contracting zone north of the Mekong delta and eventually destroyed them. By the beginning of the 19th century, the continual pressures exerted by the Thai and Annamese kingdoms began to be exerted on the Cambodian and Laotian territories until the former states attained a common frontier on the middle Mekong.

Although European interest in Indochina dates from earlier centuries, direct control came only in the last half of the 19th century. Cochin China was annexed by France in 1862 and expanded in 1867. Cambodia became a protectorate in 1863 to preserve it from extinction and Annam, including Tonkin, was added in 1884. Finally, in 1893, the Laos protectorate completed the territory of French Indochina. During the period of French tutelage, the present-day boundary between Laos and Viet-Nam (Annam-Tonkin) was established.

With the collapse of Indochina after World War II, Viet-Nam became independent on March 8, 1949, and Laos on July 19 of the same year. Both countries have been plagued by communist inspired insurrections since independence. The Geneva Conference of 1954 accepted the provisional partitioning of Viet-Nam approximately along the 17th parallel of north latitude (see International Boundary Study No. 19). As a consequence, most of the Laos boundary is with the northern, communist-administered part of Viet-Nam.

D. Routes and Transport

As a consequence of its geographic position adjacent to North Viet-Nam, the eastern border of Laos has assumed great significance in the southeast Asian crisis. North Vietnamese support to the Pathet Lao movement in Laos and its direct intervention in South Viet-Nam have involved the crossing of the Laos–Viet-Nam frontier. From north to south, the major natural routes and/or highways crossing the border are as follows:

- 1) Lai Chau–Phong Saly route could attain considerable significance due to the construction of a road from Meng La in Yunnan to Phong Saly in northern Laos. (National Route No. 4)
- 2) Dien Bein Phu is the focus of three minor trails leading southwest and south from the Vietnamese town in Laos.
- 3) National Route No. 6 and two other routes lead from the north to the middle valley of the Song Ma and thence to the important Laotian center of Sam Neua.

- 4) National Route No. 7 is probably the most important supply route leading from Tonkin to the Pathet Lao controlled Plain of Jars in Laos. The road utilizes the gentle gradient of the Song Ca valley almost to the border. For a brief distance east of the frontier the road is relatively steep before the Plain is encountered.
- 5) National Route No. 8 utilizes the natural route through the Annamite Chain near its narrowest segment and joins the important Vietnamese center of Vinh with the Cammon plateau in Laos.
- 6) National Route No. 12–15 is a more tortuous route than either No. 7 or No. 8. This road nevertheless serves as an important artery joining Ha Tinh in Viet-Nam with Nhommarath in Laos on the southern end of the Cammon plateau.
- 7) National Route No. 9 is the northernmost road joining Laos with South Viet-Nam via the important Laotian frontier of Tchepone. The road skirts the rugged limestone sector and crosses the border via the narrow and level basalt area.
- 8) Hue and Saravane are joined by a minor trail following the natural route of the upper Sé Khong. (Route 923)
- 9) Attopeu and Route No. 14 are connected by a minor trail which utilizes the natural route of the upper Sé Kamane. National Route No. 14 parallels the border in South Viet-Nam.

III. ANALYSIS OF BOUNDARY ALIGNMENT

The precise alignment of the Laos–Viet-Nam boundary may be determined from the 1:100,000 Carte de l'Indochine published by the French Service Géographique de l'Indochine (SGI). The series has been subsequently adopted by the national geographic institutes of the individual states. The texts of the various international and internal acts are either too imprecise or too limited in scope to be of value except for one area.²

From the Chinese tripoint, the Laos–Viet-Nam boundary follows a principal watershed in the Northern Highlands for 129 miles southeastward to the vicinity of Dien Bien Phu where, for a short distance, it leaves the main NW–SE trending ridges and turns southward to attain a parallel ridge. Northwest of Dien Bien Phu, the boundary coincides with the Nam Meuk (river) and one of its tributaries for 7.6 miles; a minor watershed for 36 miles; and then the Nam Noua and its tributaries for 16.5 miles before rejoining the watershed ridge southwest of the town. For the next 111 miles the

² The AMS 1:50,000 series are actually more precise in the terrain representation. They have been accepted, with one minor exception, by the Government of the Viet-Nam.

boundary again follows the NW–SE aligned ridge pattern and the main watershed south of the Song Ma.

North of Sam Neua, the boundary swings northward to cross the Song Ma before mounting the watershed north of that river. It follows this feature for 61 miles except near the point where National Route No. 6 crosses the frontier. The alteration from the watershed is probably directly related to the highway. For the next 17.3 miles the boundary follows a complex pattern utilizing minor streams as well as bisecting several others before it coincides with the Song Ma for a distance of 9.2 miles.

After departing the river, the border again coincides with the water divide for 122 miles, first in a generally southeasterly and then southerly and westerly directions. In this sector, the head waters of five minor streams are cut by the boundary and a small river, the Song Luong, is followed for a distance of 4.7 miles. Although the Nam Sam is crossed, the boundary coincides in general with a watershed for 48 miles until it joins the Song Ca system at 104° 19' E. and 19° 40' N. The Song Ca and its tributary, the Houei May, are followed for 29.5 miles. Turning southward, the border alternately coincides with minor divides and minor streams for approximately 26 miles until at 104° 04' E. and 19° 25' N.; it joins the Nam Mo, a principal tributary of the Song Ca, for over 20 miles. Three miles north of the junction, the boundary crosses the strategic National Route No. 7.

The boundary, after leaving the Song Ca system for the Chaîne Annamitique, extends southeastward for 225 miles along the major watershed of the chain. After crossing National Route No. 12-15 at 105° 46' E. and 17° 40' N., the border enters a desolate limestone upland devoid of surface drainage. The boundary has been drawn generally southeast for 25 miles as a straight line before rejoining the water divide for an additional 61 miles. A secondary stretch of limestone is encountered in the vicinity of the demilitarized zone where the boundary again becomes a straight line extending now due south for 21.6 miles. In a complex pattern continuing southward for 6 miles, the border finally reaches for the Sé Pone (river) which forms the frontier for 36.6 miles. Leaving the river, the boundary again mounts the watershed for an additional 44 miles before following a NW–SE straight line (Tam Boi–Tam Lay–Ale Loc) for 4.6 miles. Here it joins the headwaters of a tributary of the Rac Lao which it follows for 10.4 miles before departing the parent stream.

Continuing southward and southeastward for 95 miles, the boundary and the watershed are again identical. In the vicinity of the upper course of the Sé Kamane, the easternmost point of the Laos–Viet-Nam frontier, the exact location of the boundary is unknown for a distance of approximately 32 miles. The two map sheets, 136 E and 142 E of the Carte de l'Indochine, available in Washington, either do not show the international boundary or have an irrational representation of it. A logical water divide

boundary may be constructed but its correctness cannot be established.³ In this area the boundary should be considered as "indefinite" and the divide followed.

Southward the boundary, with one exception, follows the watershed to the Cambodian tripoint. Approximately 15 miles north of the junction, the Dak Sat is cut by the border.

IV. TREATIES AND OTHER ACTS

The juridical basis of the Laos–Viet-Nam boundary probably stems from ancient treaties and custom as modified or made more specific by decrees of the Indochinese administration. It appears most likely that at various times the entire border has been dealt with by the French in one manner or another. For example, the Service Géographique de l'Indochine surveyed the entire boundary at various times to make it more precise. The surveyors' reports to the central administration probably have become official documents. Unfortunately, these reports and/or the supplementary decrees are not available. The general acceptance of the boundary alignment, however, is the strongest evidence of its validity.

Only one dispute has been raised along the entire boundary. In 1954 and again in 1958, North Vietnamese forces occupied and claimed an area of Laos west of the Viet-Nam demilitarized zone. At the latter date, the Laotian Government (Lao Presse Daily Bulletin No. 2,200 of February 13, 1959) presented an array of documents in favor of the existing line. The oldest of the cited treaties dated from 1364 and was signed by the kings of Annam (Viet-Nam) and Lan Xang (Laos). The boundary was set "by the parting of the waters." However, in the ensuing period Vietnamese settlers moved into the area west of the watershed. After a detailed study, the Governor General of Indochina decreed on October 2, 1916, that the boundary between the provinces of Quang Tri (Annam) and Savannakhet (Laos) "starts at Peak 1221 and follows from north to south 1159 78' until it meets bench mark 1020 m82." This delimitation adequately describes the boundary west of the Viet-Nam DMZ. Moreover, the maps of the Geneva Armistice agreement creating the DMZ show the boundary in the same manner and its map was accepted by all signers of the Geneva agreement.

The complete text of the cited 1916 decree which delimits the Laos–Viet-Nam boundary from the Keo-Nua Pass (18° 23' N; 105° 10' E) to the Ap-Sap valley (16° 12' N.; 107° 09' E.) is as follows:

The Interim Governor General of Indochina, Commander of the Legion of Honor.
In view of the decrees of 20 October 1911, indicating the powers of the Governor General and the financial and administrative structures of Indochina;

In view of the decree of 26 April 1916;

³ The French mapping agency (IGN) has been asked for clarification but none has been received at this writing. However, a recent Vietnamese map (1:500,000) published in Saigon definitely utilizes the watershed.

In view of the minister's circular dated 20 June 1911;

In view of the Governor General's instructions on 21 May 1916;

In view of the decree of 20 September 1915, issued on 20 November of the same year;

In view of the decree of 27 December 1913, setting up a commission charged with setting about delimiting the Annam–Laos border;

In view of the official report, dated 21 March 1914, by the commission established by that decree;

At the suggestion of the Supreme Residents in Annam and Laos;

The permanent Commission of the Government Council in Indochina consenting.

DECREES

Article 1: The delimitation of the boundary between the provinces of Ha-Tinh, Dong-Hoi, Quang-Tri, Thua-Thien (Annam) on the one side and Cammon, Savannakhet (Laos) on the other, is fixed as follows:

1. Ha-Tinh and Dong-Hoi with Cammon:

This boundary starts in the north at the intersection of the watershed line with the Ha-Trai-Hape investigation route, or from the top of the Keo-Nua Pass. From this point the boundary runs SSE along with watershed line, across the Tram-Mua peak and the Mu-Gia pass to mountain top 1221, marked on the 1:100,000 map, Quang-Tri sheet, at 18G90 latitude and 115G78E. longitude.

2. Quang-Tri with Savannakhet:

"The border starts from elevation 1221 and runs N–S along the 115.78 meridian to its meeting with bench mark 1020m82 at Dong-Ta-Buc. From this peak it runs straight to the Lao-Bao Post, in Annam, leaving to Laos North Lang P'atlat and to Annam South Lang P'atlat; from Lao-Bao the border cuts across the bend in the Se-Tchepone, leaving Laos, the village of Ban-Phuong, and the land around it.

From Ban-Phuong to Ta-Tcha the boundary follows the Se-Tchepone."

"The boundary then leaves the Se-Tchepone at the Khe-Kang confluence, retaining Ta-Tcha in Laos, and running along the watershed between the Ta-Riep and the Khe-

Kang, it reaches the main watershed at the Ko-Pat peak, at 116G10 E. longitude and 189G40 latitude.

3. Thua-Thien with Savannakhet:

"From Ko-Pat the border follows the watershed to the Pou-Tam-Boi peak (geodetic monument 1193.3) located near 116G38E. longitude and 18G17N. latitude. From there it moves in a straight line toward peak 982.8 (Dong A-Bia); and upon reaching the river from Lang Annam, A-Le-Thien, and A-Le-Lok, it runs south and southwest down this on the left bank to the upper A-Sap valley, which is left entirely in Annam with all its tributaries. Farther south, the marking will be done later."

Article 2 The Supreme Residents in Annam and Laos are enjoined, each within his jurisdiction, to carry out the provisions of this decree.

Saigon, 12 October 1916

E. CHARLES

N.B. at present the six villages of Lang-Ha, Lang Thien, Polo, Salai, Tano (or Nuc-Huc-Ho or Nu-Ko) and Lamo scattered along the river, belong sometimes to Annam, sometimes to Laos.

The heads of the two provinces of Quang-Tri and Savannakhet must watch the periodic shifts of Khas peoples, to retain them in the lands belonging to them, so that the Se-Tchepone will be the definitive boundary between the two countries.

In the absence of precise information on the Mois lands south of the A-Sap, the border cannot be exactly traced. Hence, all leeway is left to the representatives of the two countries to rule upon any dispute that may arise out of this lack of precision, until a final decision is made.

Intended to be appended to the decree
signed today, 12 October 1916
Interim Governor General of Indochina

E. CHARLES

This decree delimits approximately two-thirds of the Laos-Viet-Nam boundary in the Chaîne Annamitique.

V. SUMMARY

The boundary between Laos and Viet-Nam should be considered as international, i.e., delimited, by the cartographic agencies. However, in view of the lack of total documentation, the standard disclaimer that the boundary is "not necessarily authoritative" should be carried on official maps. Where scale permits, the sector covered by map sheets 136E and 142E of the Carte de l'Indochina may be shown as "indefinite" pending additional documentation. The alignment of the AMS 1:50,000 series should be utilized for the best representation of the water divide and the boundary. The National Geographic Service of Viet-Nam 1:500,000 series is excellent for small-scale compilation.

This International Boundary Study is one of a series of specific boundary papers prepared by the Geographer, Office of Research in Economics and Science, Bureau of Intelligence and Research, Department of State, in accordance with provisions of Bureau of the Budget Circular No. A-16.

Government agencies may obtain additional information and copies of the study by calling the Geographer, Room 8744, Department of State, Washington, D.C. (Telephone: Code 182, Extension 4508).